



<http://www.scaryguys.com/hauntline.htm>

## Wait! Don't Leave!

Watching frustrated guests leave your waiting line before they buy a ticket is a very distressing experience. You have lost them before you even get started. What can you do to keep your guests from leaving? Offer lower prices? Get guard dogs? Hire bouncers? Give away lizards? Hire bouncers with guard dogs? These methods may work, but, short of these drastic measures, you have many options available. From hiring professional entertainers to creating your own show you have many possible ways to keep your guests in line, ready to go through your show.

### Get a Pro

Hiring a professional entertainer or celebrity has many benefits. They know how to keep your audience interested and entertained. Your event benefits from the increased publicity exposure. Your guests get perceive a better value for their entertainment dollar.

There are many kinds of professionals to work with. Almost any kind of entertainer that targets the same audience you do will keep your guests amused:

- Magicians are a favorite for haunted events. Magic and haunted attractions have a natural connection. Close-up magic is great to entertain small groups of guests while they wait. Occasional large, theatrical magic shows entertain the entire line.
- Stand-up comedians add a unique twist. Laughter eases tension and actually makes it easier to scare your guests.
- Well-known celebrities are often hired to meet your guests, sign autographs, get photos taken, and act as spokesperson to the media.
- Some larger haunts produce their own shows including precision chainsaw marching, ghoulish DJs, 'Thriller' dances, and even hire rock bands to entertain waiting lines.

Professional entertainers expect and require a well-defined area to perform or sign autographs. This may include roped-off areas, stages, tables, chairs, rest areas, food

and drinks, and additional security to ensure the entertainer can give their best performance.

Be sure your choice is right before you hire an entertainer. Often, professional entertainers work through a talent agency or manager. Even though working through an agency is more expensive, you get a better quality act and a wider selection of potential artists. Agencies offer access to multiple entertainers, and can often supply an emergency replacement in the event your entertainer cannot appear.

Ask for a publicity package for potential clients. This package should include sufficient information to help you choose an entertainer including photographs, a short history, and references. Finding the right person who 'fits' the style of your event is key to getting the most from your investment.

Ask the agency for a copy of their contract to define terms of employment, payment, restrictions, penalties, and any additional requirements for the artist's performance. Get a calendar of appearances for your prospective entertainer. Audition their show in person, ask for a video presentation of their recent act, call their references.

Focus on keeping your costs in line. Carefully evaluate your needs and the expense of the entertainer. You may get great publicity, keep an extra hundred guests in line, and gain a few hundred more - and end up with a net loss for all the extra work!

Once you choose an entertainer, get maximum advantage for your event. Use the opportunity to improve your advertising and marketing. Arrange some advertising time highlighting your entertainer. Get publicity photos of the entertainers working at your event with guests, your staff, and yourself. These photos are useful for all sorts of publicity, advertising and marketing for this year and the following years.

Working with professional entertainers is very rewarding and can mean additional revenue for your haunt. Proceed slowly and carefully and know the risks, costs, and benefits before committing your budget dollars.

### **Use Video**

Setup video cameras in the haunt and show guests who are waiting in line the fright they are about to experience. Choose the location of the camera carefully. Pick a good scare. Do not show the scare itself, but carefully place the camera to show the guest's reaction to the scare. Watch the background for any visual clues and move, remove, or duplicate them in several places. Use black and white cameras instead of color cameras. They are smaller, less expensive, more sensitive to low light and keep from giving your waiting guest clues where the cameras are located.

Add a video tape recorder to capture your guests reactions for your cast party at the end of the show and as footage for your promotional tape. Remember to post a disclaimer that you are video taping guests. And, you can use recorded video clips of

guest reactions to play for guests in line. Recorded video can give as much excitement as live video when used this way. You can also add clips of old monster movie trailers, or excerpts from movies, but be sure to check on copyright restrictions. You may be required to pay a licensing fee!

You can use as many cameras, VCRs, and TVs as you budget allows. Remember: as complexity goes up, so do the hassles and failures. You need to watch for loose cables that guests or staff may trip over or grab. Watch for cable distances and signal loss, adequate power outlets and their location. Be sure to use sturdy mounts for cameras, VCRs, and TVs. Have sufficient tapes on hand, and have someone to change (and label) them. And don't forget security to ensure nothing 'grows legs and walks off'.

Like hiring professional entertainers, using video can be very rewarding, but be sure to develop a plan. Include costs of the equipment, cables, tapes, personnel - everything that is related to video. Draw a floor plan and include the location of every piece of equipment, the direction and placement of cameras and displays, the cable runs and their length and safety and security measures. This planning will help you discover possible problems before opening night!

### **Use Music**

Another option is music. Choose a volume level and style that fits in with the theme of your haunt. Loud rock music may not necessarily fit with a classic Victorian haunted house. Alternately, moderate spooky sounds may not work with an alien invasion. In either case, you need to put together a sound system capable of reliably reproducing the desired music accurately at the desired volume level. You can play music you created yourself, or use pre-recorded music.

Don't rule out recording your own sounds. You'll be surprised how many sounds are around you which work in a haunt. You don't need expensive, elaborate equipment to record your own sounds. Just a good tape recorder, microphone, tapes, headphones and imagination are all that's needed.

Recordings are available anywhere that sells music. Blockbuster, Best Buy, K-Mart, Wal-Mart, discount/closeout bins, yard sales, flea markets, catalogs are all great sources. If you use prerecorded sounds, be sure you understand if you need public performance releases from BMI or ASCAP if you're a commercial haunt. The cost is reasonable and gives you lots of flexibility. The penalties can be severe.

### **Use Yourself!**

Given your budget, working the line yourself is always an option. Depending on you or your staff's skills, you have many opportunities to entertain the crowd.

- If you or one of your staff can perform simple close-up magic, a few tricks used occasionally, will help keep guests interested.

- Telling a story about the history or background of the haunt appeals to the guests and sparks their interest to see what's inside. The more drama you include in your presentation will help build the mood. We have had guests argue over the details of our story!
- Have an actor posing as a guest (called a 'shill') burst out of the house screaming. Add torn clothing and a very ragged appearance to increase the effect. Overdone theatrics will add a bit of humor to the entertainment. Staff members can catch the 'escapee' and drag them back inside "Hey, you haven't seen the really scary stuff, yet!". Or, help the ragged guest to recover by giving them a chair, fanning his/her face, and taking a pulse. To add a touch of humor, end the skit with a staff member throwing a bucket of water in the actor's face!
- Have a shill join the line. Sometime later, a monster bursts from the house, grabs the 'guest' and drags them kicking and screaming into the house.

### **My Favorite Line**

Here's my favorite way to entertain the line: Look for Lost Small Creatures. It sounds simple, but has many advantages: its inexpensive, doesn't take extra staff to do, it may be performed over long periods of time, starts the guests talking, and generates excitement and interest among the guests. The staff can still perform their 'real' duties while also entertaining the line. It works best with at least two people, but its still effective with one person.

### **Here's the idea:**

- Staff members begin to search among the guests with their flashlights for 'something' on the floor. If a guest asks questions, avoid directly answering, but always appear concerned and keep looking.
- Occasionally, one or the other staffer disappears from sight then reappears in another area still looking. (This lets the staffer perform repairs, get drinks, escort guests, etc.)
- Staffers occasionally confer among themselves, shaking and scratching their heads, looking around, looking worried, then continue the search. (actually, this is the time to pick a small group of 'screamers' in line to 'perform with' later...)
- After a while, a staffer appears carrying an 'empty' burlap sack, all the while looking around. Then he/she disappears into or behind the haunt.
- After a few more minutes, the staffer reappears with a vibrating, shaking bag, still looking (ignoring the shaking bag).
- Then, both staffers converge behind the 'screamers', still looking. The staffer with the bag asks one of the group to hold the bag while they look. Most won't take it, but some will. Teen males will take the bag to scare others. Almost everyone will ask what's inside. Never tell them, but offer to show them - "wanna see?".
- Make a 'big deal' of pulling out the moving thing. First, pull out rubber snakes and rats (ask guests to hold them) all while trying to grab the still moving thing. "Ouch! - Darn sharp teeth". Wiggle and shake the bag. Have a guest help hold the bag (a 'screamer' is best!).

- Finally, pull out a vibrating Bumble Ball and toss on the ground in front of the best screamer. This works like Moses parting the red sea. I've had guests climb on top of fences, posts, and the closest guest, screaming to the top of their lungs, all the while pointing at the harmless Bumble Ball.
- Pull the guests off the ceiling, pack everything up, and wait until the line changes enough to have new participants. Then begin again. Encourage the chatter in the line about 'what happened a few minutes ago'.

Oh yes, the mind is a wonderful thing to play with... There are many variations to this gag, depending on the style of your event:

- Body parts - squishy and still twitching as you dig into the bag. Wrap parts in plastic bags, make it as bloody as your theme (and guests) allow.
- Alien creatures - the creatures get, stranger, uglier, and livelier as you proceed.
- Spell casting ingredients - some are still alive...
- Then there's always the air horn...

### **Something for the kids**

You will get small children regardless of the style of your haunt. Parents or older brothers and sisters bring them. Sometimes its the kid that insists they want to go, sometimes its the family who insists. But there is a problem with small kids going to scary events: to them, all this make-believe stuff is REAL. No kidding. They do not separate reality from make-believe. So all the stuff in the haunt is as real as anything else. This changes what an adult perceives as fun into pure terror for a child. I hope no one reading this really wants to terrorize small children. Remember, this is only entertainment!

So, how do you avoid this? One of the best ways to put someone's mind at ease is to give them a little bit of control. Giving a bit of control to a child is important. This helps them realize its only make-believe, and will help them (and their parents) sleep a bit better. Try this trick to help calm their fear. All it takes is an inexpensive squeaking rat or some other noisemaker, or a light like a flashlight or a glow stick. My favorite device is the rubber rat.

- First, talk to the child. Kneel down at their eye level, and smile a lot. Be friendly. A 'Mister Rogers' approach works best. Of course, you should not be in costume or makeup. Looking normal and friendly is important to giving the kid assurance that you are real and you are telling the truth.
- Depending on the youngster, ask them if they want to hold your squeaking rubber rat. Squeak it a couple of times. If they take the rat, ask them to squeeze it to produce a couple of good squeaks. Encourage them to squeak it at their parents (or older kids with them). Usually, the older folks will play along and act startled. If the child doesn't want to take the rat, show them the rat, then squeak it for them. Do not force them to take the rat if they don't want to touch it.

- Work to help minimize their fear. "See, its just a fake rat. Its made of rubber. Its just make-believe. There's nothing real about it.", Then point to the haunt, "This place is just like this fake rubber rat, its kinda scary at first, but its all just make-believe, there's nothing real about it, nothing in there that can hurt you, Its all just make-believe!". Encourage the parents to re-enforce the idea.
- If it helps, give the rat to the kid and say "if what's inside gets too scary, just squeak the rat the actor, and they will stop. I'll see you on the way out, ok?". And be sure to tell the actors inside to ease up on the scare when they hear squeaking. They can even act afraid of the rat, and turn a potentially terrorizing situation into a fun time for the entire group. This gives the child the power to control the situation, and perhaps even enjoy themselves.
- Also, take an extra moment to inform the parents about the exits in case the haunt is too intense for the child and the parents need to get them out.
- Working to minimize a kid's fear is a hit with parents, who really appreciate the extra time and concern for their little ones. Many parents tell us they recommend our haunt to their friends. For very little effort, this technique generates positive word-of-mouth advertising and gets future customers as the kids get older, and bring their friends!
- Alternatives to the rat include inexpensive flashlights or glow sticks youngsters can use to 'scare those monsters'. Just tell the kids to wave the light at the monster. You know monsters are afraid of this 'special' light, don't you? (wink) You can collect the lights (or rats) after the child has gone through by adding that other kids will need this 'special magic' to keep them from being afraid, too.

Remember, when talking to the kids, be sure to get to eye level with them, talk softly, and smile a lot! This shows you care about them, and are talking to them, not 'down' to them.

### **End of the line**

The real test of how successful your line entertaining has worked is to ask two questions of your guests as they enter the haunt: "Have you minded the wait in line?", and "About how long have you waited?"

Positive responses are good, of course, but you may learn more from a negative response! If you get one, dig deeper. "what would you want different", "would some kind of entertainment help the wait?", "what kind?", "what would you like?", etc. Listening to your guests helps you improve your event every year.

I am always interested to hear how you keep your guests 'in line' and buying tickets. Drop me a note and share your experiences.

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